

VZCZCXYZ0001
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHZP #0523/01 181211Z
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 302112Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3542
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 2820
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE 2027
RHMFISS/COMDT COGARD WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/DIRJIATF SOUTH
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000523

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: EARLY INDICATIONS ON SECURITY POLICY OF
NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: PANAMA 00725/08

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The incoming government of Panama will not/not dismantle the National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) or the National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN), two of the key security services created by the reforms of the outgoing government of Martin Torrijos (see reftel). This is one of Post's key conclusions following a series of meetings between the Ambassador and President-elect Ricardo Martinelli, Vice President-elect and Foreign Minister-designate Juan Carlos Varela, and Minister of Government and Justice-elect Jose Raul Mulino. The new government also strongly supports the continuation of Panamax, and is broadly supportive of the Embassy's strategy for the Darien, as laid out in our recently approved 1207 proposal. There also seems to be a strong interest in greater cooperation with Colombia to deal with the FARC presence in the Darien. Varela has indicated concerns about how our Sensitive Investigative Units (SIU) function, but Post is working to allay his concerns. End Summary.

Cosmetic Changes to Security Reforms

¶2. (C) "We are not going to dismantle SENAFRONT," Varela told the Ambassador June 17. He said that while there might be some superficial changes, neither SENAFRONT nor SENAN would be dismantled, and that the incoming government was unlikely to remove SENAFRONT Director Frank Abrego or SENAN Director Rigoberto Gordon. (Comment: Both of these men have been very successful at raising the operational effectiveness of their units, and enjoy good relations with the Embassy. End Comment.) Varela said there might be cosmetic changes, including changes in name and uniform. Incoming Panamanian National Police (PNP) Director Gustavo Perez told PolOff May 7 that SENAFRONT would be folded back into the PNP, as it had been before the reforms, but would retain functional independence.

¶3. (C) Varela extended no such assurances about the

National Intelligence and Security Service (SENIS), which was also created in the same reform process. Democratic Change (CD) security advisor Jaime Abad told PolOff on March 23 that Martinelli deeply distrusted the SENIS, and wanted to dismantle it. However, Varela indicated that the government would wait until they had had a chance to fully analyze how the SENIS was functioning before making any decisions.

I Love Panamax

¶4. (C) "I love Panamax," President-elect Martinelli told the Ambassador June 18, after the Ambassador explained the multi-national naval exercise and the Panamanian national security planning exercise that takes place at the same time, Panamax Alpha. Garuz was given a detailed briefing on Panamax during the Final Planning Conference in Panama June 2, to help familiarize the incoming government with the major exercise. Garuz said he was pleased with the briefing, and looked forward to the exercise.

Shared Vision on the Darien

¶5. (C) Varela said he was "totally on the same page" with Post's Darien strategy in his June 17 meeting with the Ambassador. He said he wanted to pursue a law-enforcement approach to the Darien, and welcomed the Embassy's focus on intelligence, combined counter-narcotics operations, and a progressively stronger SENAFRONT presence establishing control of population centers as the best way forward. Varela

also told the Ambassador that he was very interested in the governance aspects of the Darien strategy and wished to discuss them further. Martinelli told the Ambassador that the FARC posed a clear danger in the Darien, and needed to be dealt with, though he did not have any concrete plans for moving forward, beyond a vague plan for a "land operation."

¶6. (C) Minister of Government and Justice-designate Jose Raul Mulino told the Ambassador on June 23 that he, Varela and Martinelli had discussed increased cooperation against the FARC on the Colombian border with President Uribe at a recent meeting. He said they discussed: 1) increasing the security presence on both sides of the border; 2) increasing cooperation on migration issues, so the Panamanian authorities would know in advance who was entering Panama from Colombia via air; and 3) creating an information operation for the FARC in the Darien that would encourage them to de-mobilize, and then send them to Colombia for insertion in their program. Mulino said that "we will do what we have to do" to capture the leaders of the FARC in Panama, and limit their ability to operate. He said that there was pressure to take decisive action, as there was a danger that Colombia would launch a unilateral cross-border operation, which he said would be a disaster for Panama.

Wither SIUs?

¶7. (C) Varela told the Ambassador that he was concerned about the existence of police units in Panama that responded to USG agencies and not the host government. He said he believed such units "allowed drug shipments to get through" in order to capture cartel leaders, at the expense of Panamanian security. The Embassy organized a security briefing for leaders of the incoming government on June 23 to overcome concerns such as this, and to present the USG security strategy in Panama (septel).

Comment

¶6. (C) Post believes that the incoming Martinelli

government will not/not dismantle SENAFRONT or SENAN. The Ambassador and EmbOffs have been stressing the importance of these organizations since before the May 3 election, and the message seems to have been received. Together with the strong indications that Abrego and Gordon will remain in place at least for the immediate future, this puts our continuing security cooperation on sound footing. We also welcome Martinelli's strong commitment to Panamax, and anticipate no problems maintaining this important exercise throughout his presidency. The strong support for improved governance and law-enforcement in the Darien voiced by Varela and Mulino bode well for Post's Darien strategy, which is on track to be funded with the recently approved 1207 funds. While Varela's concerns about USG direct support to PNP units, referring to Post's Sensitive Investigative Units (SIUs), on which much of our successful counter-narcotics work is based, is troubling, we believe that he can be reassured on this account. Post will report septel on our efforts to reassure him on this score.

STEPHENSON